Sanskaar and Sutak

If Sanskaars are the landmarks in our lives then Sutak is a specific period of time that follows two major Sanskaars. Both these age-old concepts are found in Hindu culture and are associated with several norms and rituals. Let’s understand these concepts and learn more about them.

Sanskaar

Sanskaars are rites of passage that prepare us to take up the responsibilities associated with the next stage of our lives. Some Sanskaars are major landmarks while others are small milestones. A different set of rituals is associated with each Sanskaar. There are 16 Sanskaars in all.

The 16 Sanskaars of Hinduism

Garbhadaan (conception), Punsavana (Foetus protection), Simantonayana (satisfying the wishes of a pregnant woman), Jatakarma (birth rituals), Nishkramana (taking the child outdoors), Annaprashana (giving solid food to the child), Mundan(Hair cut), Karnvedh (Ear piercing), Upanayana (sacred thread), Vedarambh (the study of Vedas and scriptures), Samavartana (completing education), Vivaha (marriage), Vanaprastha (Renunciation), Sanyasa (study and meditation), Antyeshti/Antim Sanskaar(Funeral).

But there is more to it. It is believed that Sanskaars are related to our karma. We are born with the residual karma of our previous births. This exists within us in the form of mental impressions/ psychological imprints at a subconscious level.

And our residual karma manifests itself in our lives in the form of our inherent traits and tendencies. They also have a direct bearing on our character, responses and state of mind.

When we perform these ceremonies in the physical realm, they bring about a change within our subconscious and transform our personality. Also, each Sanskaar helps us understand that life has no “beginning” and no “end” - that birth and death are just parts of a cosmic cycle. So we just need to focus on improving the quality of our life and reduce our karmic baggage in this life so that we can exit from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth and attain Moksha.

Sutak

Sutak is a period of quarantine observed by most Hindus. Pindru or Vruddhi Sutak is observed after the Jatakarman Sanskaar i.e. after a woman delivers a child and Mrityu Sutak or Patak is observed after Antyesti or Antin Sanskaar i.e after a person dies. The immediate family members quarantine themselves after these two Sanskaars. Why?

Pindru or Vruddhi Sutak

Vruddhi Sutak is usually observed by the immediate family members for 10 days after a woman delivers a child. The mother and the newborn child are confined to a special room and are not allowed to mingle with others. The family members refrain from going to temples and do not attend any ceremonies.

Goddess Shashti is worshipped on the sixth day of this period. It is believed that She writes the destiny of the newborn child on this day. A priest conducts the Punya Vaachan on the 11th day after which sweets and gifts are distributed amongst friends and relatives. This day marks the end of the 10 day Vruddhi Sutak for all family members.

Significance of the Vruddhi Sutak

A woman becomes very weak and tired after she gives birth to a child. She needs to rest. Only then will her body regain its strength. Also, her body continues to secrete fluids for 40 days. And both the mother and the newborn child are prone to infections during this phase. It takes 40 days for her body to heal completely and for their immune systems to build up. So the mother and the newborn child are usually quarantined for 40 days.

No Temple Visits During Sutak

In Hinduism, God is believed to be full of Sattva Guna. And before we offer our prayers to Him, we need to purify ourselves. Why? So that we tune into his realm and connect to Him personally. Simple.

If we delve into it just a bit more, we will find a kind that an intangible purity scale has been created for our benefit. The basic belief is that a person who secretes any kind of fluids from his/her body is not pure enough (NOT impure) to pray and/or offer service to God as the case may be because we are exposed to bacteria at such times.

Sleeping, eating, sneezing, vomiting, getting a haircut, clipping nails, intercourse, running noses, coughing, emptying our bladder and bowels, menstruation et al fall in this category.

A priest, therefore, purifies himself/herself physically, mentally and emotionally before entering the sanctum sanctorum. He performs the Sandhya Vandanam three times a day, chants, meditates and performs rituals to do so.

Normal folks like you and me can offer our prayers to a deity. But from afar. Why? Because we just have a bath after performing our ablutions. We have not cleansed ourselves mentally and emotionally. So we get to do only the darshan and are not allowed to touch the deity or perform any rituals within the sanctum sanctorum.

And since we women continuously secrete fluids for about 40 days after delivering our babies, we stand on a lower rung of the purity scale and are not “allowed” to visit temples or attend ceremonies during this phase.

Mrityu Sutak or Patak

Mrityu Sutak is usually observed for 16 days by the immediate family members and relatives after a person dies – the last landmark of life’s journey - the Antyeshti or Antim Sanskaar.

During Mrityu Sutak the bereaved family members grieve for the deceased person. Our relatives visit us, discuss how the person passed away and help us cope with the loss. We break the old torans before the body is cremated. We don’t draw rangolis outside our homes for 16 days. We don’t read any holy books. Only the Garud Puran to understand what happens to

the soul after a person dies. We don’t visit any temple, pray or chant. We cook only satvik food. We women don’t apply bindis or oil our hair too. Water and black sesame are offered to our Pitrs during the death rites.

During Mrityu Sutak we renounce all the activities of our daily life for 16 days. We focus on only one thing: We pray for the departed soul, think of our ancestors and seek their help so that the departed soul can cross the Vaitarni and gain Moksha.

All the ceremonies that are conducted during the Mrityu Sutak are only for our Pitrs. Not for Gods. That is why the Janoi is worn over the left shoulder during this phase. After 13 days, we decorate our homes with fresh floral torans, cook a simple sweet, invite all our family members for a satvik meal and apply oil to our hair. We feed Brahmins, the poor and the hungry. This is a symbolic way of telling ourselves that we can resume leading our normal lives now.

Significance of the Mrityu Sutak

A dead person’s body decomposes very quickly. The fumes emitted out of the funeral pyre may be full of bacteria. The deceased person’s house may be full of contagious bacteria and the family members may be carriers of these bacteria. So they quarantine themselves to avoid infecting others. And we have a bath as soon as we return home from crematoriums or after we visit the home of a deceased person.

Grief creates physical mental and emotional upheaval. Tears also fall into the category of “secretions.” So during this phase, we stand on a lower rung of the purity scale and avoid visiting

temples till we regain our equanimity. Do such concepts help us psychologically? Obviously, they do. But I doubt if any of this can be proved. Such things are intangible. They can only be experienced.

Yes, today, we are unable to follow these norms for various very practical reasons. But that does not take away the beauty of it all. And that should not deter us from having faith in them. We need to appreciate the fact that such concepts were created by our infinitely wise ancestors who cared for our all-round well-being. And we can do so only if we are aware of the significance of such concepts.